



GIVING IRAQ NEW WINGS

AMERICAN AIRMEN HELP REBUILD
COUNTRY'S SHATTERED AIR FORCE

BY STAFF SGT. TREVOR TIERNAN
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An Iraqi air force C-130 Hercules takes off on an airlift mission from Baghdad International Airport. The plane and crew, of Iraq's 23rd Transport Squadron, are from New Al Muthana Air Base. American Airmen are helping rebuild Iraq's air force.

Eighteen years ago the Air Force did all it could to destroy Saddam Hussein's military.

Iraq was the region's military superpower. But by the end of the Gulf War, U.S. airpower had devastated Iraq's military and destroyed most of its highly touted air force of more than 500 combat aircraft.

By the end of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the country's air force lay in ruins. But coalition military leaders knew Iraq needed a strong military to survive and to give the shattered country new hope. It was a decision welcomed by Iraqis like Brig. Gen. Abdul Kareem.



An Iraqi air force warrant officer dons his oxygen mask during a practical exam before graduating from firefighter school at Taji Air Base, Iraq. The airman was one of the first to graduate from the firefighter apprentice course. Air Force firefighters with Taji's 370th Expeditionary Training Squadron provided the training.



Tech. Sgt. Lamar Anderson gives a class on core values to a group of Iraqi air force warrant officer trainees. Sergeant Anderson is a military training instructor from Lackland Air Force Base, Texas. He is with the 370th Expeditionary Training Squadron, Taji Air Base, Iraq.

“The air force is a great symbol for any nation,” said General Kareem, commandant of the Iraqi Air Force Training School at Taji Air Base.

Today, a group of more than 300 Airmen is helping rebuild Iraq’s air force into a modern, self-sufficient, defense force. The Airmen, from a host of different specialties and backgrounds, make up the Coalition Air Force Transition Team, which Brig. Gen. Robert Allardice commands. He said the team’s job is to help Iraq stand up its air force and return to the air.

“By 2003, the Iraqi air force was decimated,” General Allardice said. “They didn’t have any infrastructure, any people and there were no airplanes flying. It was completely taken apart.”

The plan to rebuild Iraq’s shattered air force began that same year, with a small group of former Iraqi airmen. By 2005, the Air Force took the challenge of turning a former adversary into a strong ally. But progress was slow. By January 2007, Iraq’s air force still did not have an air force academy, a flight training school, a technical school or a basic military training school.

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Because of the team’s work, all these schools are in place and actively graduating students less than a year later, General Allardice said. Iraq’s air force also started to take off, increasing its sortie rate from about 30 missions per week to more than 350.

The general said the hope is that the relationship Airmen are building with their Iraqi counterparts will not only increase the fledgling force’s power and capacity, but that will make the new air force “understanding and friendly to our needs and interests.”

The transition team is working toward that end. Operating from several locations in Iraq, the team’s training mission closely follow that used in the training pipeline U.S. Airmen pass through on their way to the operational Air Force. Initial training is at Taji and Rustimayah air bases. Flying training takes place at Kirkuk Air Base. And operational squadrons are flying sorties from Taji, Basra and New Al Muthana air bases.

Familiar training

Staff Sgt. Benny Fields is one of the team members. As a military training instructor, he has trained many new Airmen. But today, his flight is made of Iraqi warrant officer candidates.

“One of the biggest things we can do is show them that — without Saddam Hussein — they can stand on their own two feet and defend their own airspace and borders,” he said.

One of six military training instructors deployed to Taji’s 370th Expeditionary Training Squadron, Sergeant Fields trains candidates just like he does at Lackland Air Force Base, Texas. He uses equal helpings of guidance, empathy and the occasional “thunderous motivation.”

The curriculum, instantly recognizable to any American basic military training graduate, varies only slightly from the Air Force standard. Iraqis get additional professional military education training. The almost 200-hour course covers familiar subjects: Uniform standards, military courtesy, physical fitness, dormitory maintenance and marksmanship. There are also added lessons on leadership, conflict management, counseling, team development and more.

Just as the course material is similar to that of Air Force basic training so, too, are the students that go through the training, Tech. Sgt. James Hamrick said.

“Aside from cultural differences, there’s really no difference,” the instructor said. “They come up with excuses just the same as (Airmen) back home. But when we show them they’ve done a good job, they get just as excited and just as re-motivated.”

One thing instructors are striving to impart on their students is an appreciation for the core values every American Airman holds true, he said.

“We have our core values of integrity, service and excellence; here we’re teaching them the same thing,” Sergeant Hamrick said. “While it’s going to take a while for them to take that onboard, they’re really taking a liking to it.”

In addition to basic military training, Taji is also home to the Iraqi Air Force Academy and the basic technical training school. The academy takes college graduates and produces newly minted mulazims, or second lieutenants.

Maj. Stuart Lloyd, deployed from the U.S. Air Force Academy, Colo., serves as the Iraqi Air Force Academy chief. The six-month academy teaches students basic military indoctrination and training, “followership,” leadership, doctrine and the history of airmanship. Cadets also learn about small-unit tactics and go through weapons qualification and familiarization, tactical communication and basic aviation ground school.

“While the police and the army are working hard to [make Iraq safe] on the ground, we’re trying to get this air force into the air so Iraq can maintain its own air superiority and keep the country secure enough to get on with the political solution,” the major said.

By merely volunteering to be a part of their country’s military, Iraqi airmen face violence to themselves and their families. It’s a risk Major Lloyd said his instructors always keep in mind when dealing with the cadets.

“I think about my cadets back home who have family issues, and how sometimes it’s hard for them to focus,” Major Lloyd said. “I sit and wonder how much harder it is for [Iraqis] to sit in class with thoughts running through their heads, like ‘I hope my wife and children are still there when I get home.’ We deal with them as best we can and try to support them.

“We know what they’re potentially putting on the line just by raising their hand (to join the air force),” the major said.

The last academy class to graduate under Saddam Hussein’s regime was class 66. The new academy continued where the old one left off and graduated class 67 in September 2007 and class 68 in December 2007. Class 70, which began in January 2008, marked the



Iraqi air force warrant officer trainees make their beds before going to class. Trainees go to great lengths to keep their dorms inspection-ready and their uniforms sharp.



Tech. Sgt. Lamar Anderson (left), Staff Sgt. Kimberli Speller (center) and Staff Sgt. Benny Fields observe Iraqi air force warrant officer trainees warm up before going on a 30-minute self-paced run. The sergeants are military training instructors from Lackland Air Force Base, Texas, deployed to Taji's 370th Expeditionary Training Squadron.

move to a nine-month long course with more emphasis placed on English-language training.

Like their U.S. counterparts, before Iraqi airmen head to their first duty stations, they attend technical training. More than 30 instructors, all current or prior technical training school instructors, offer 16 different courses at Taji.

"Right now we're [working] in an instructor capacity," said Senior Master Sgt. Ernie Allen, basic technical training superintendent. "We're hoping to transition to an advisory capacity when we get the Iraqi instructors trained and then advise them how to instruct the courses."

Deployed from Langley Air Force Base, Va., Sergeant Allen has served as a technical training instructor and a field training detachment chief and drew on this experience when it came to standing up a technical school. He and his team began by building the curriculum for the different courses. Having a stable foundation of instruction in place will help make the transition smoother when the Iraqi instructors take over teaching, he said.

Currently the tech school offers courses on flightline security, intelligence, hydraulics, propulsion, life support, firefighter preparedness and flight medicine. Air traffic control, ground radar and ground radio training will soon join the curriculum.

"We'll have everything needed to start the ground side of an air force," Sergeant Allen said.

Working at almost "bare-base" locations, instructors manage without the luxury of the state-of-the-art facilities and equipment they use back home. With only classrooms and slideshow presentations available, they improvise.

"We've gone out to the junkyard and pulled equipment off old helicopters and old MiGs and we use those for visual aids," Sergeant Allen said.

The classroom lectures and hands-on time with visual aids give students a better understanding and helps minimize information lost in translation. Instructors also work with the operational squadron to let the students see equipment in Mi-17 and Huey helicopters.

Physically returning Iraqi airmen to the air is the task of the 52nd Flying Training Squadron's flying school at Kirkuk. Airmen train,

educate and advise Iraqis as they build a rotary- and fixed-wing flying training center. Eventually, the school will graduate 120 pilots each year.

"What we're doing here is ground breaking," squadron commander Lt. Col. Mark Bennett said. "We activated the first expeditionary flying training squadron and the first flying training squadron in a combat zone. We're definitely making history here."

Operating a flying training mission in a combat zone has its own unique set of challenges.

"There are individuals who would like to see us fail and will do anything they can to get us to fail," Colonel Bennett said. "We're aware of the threat and we do all the standard preparations for a combat mission but also roll in the flying training aspect."

Though they try to retain some anonymity, the threat galvanizes the desire of Iraqi airmen to better their country.

"We know it will be difficult being the first pilots in the new air force, but we will do our mission and are not afraid of the terrorists," one student pilot said. "We and the Americans will stick together and change everything."

Team members' goal is to train Iraqis so they can handle their own operations.

"Our success will be the success of the Iraqi air force," Colonel Bennett said.

When Iraqis can operate, train, provide logistics support and maintain a credible training school, "then we can stand back and truly be in an advisory role. When everything is fully functional, we'll be out of a job and can go home."

That ultimate goal will take time to reach. But the teams' efforts are showing results at Taji, Basra and New Al Muthana, where Lt. Col. Mark Brunworth commands the 370th Air Expeditionary Advisory Squadron. His Airmen mentor Iraq's 23rd Transport Squadron.

"We're assisting in flying and maintaining the C-130 Hercules," Colonel Brunworth said. "We have three C-130s and hope to get three more in about a year."

New Al Muthana is one of the first Iraqi-run bases. Team members train and advise aircrews and command and control, maintenance and support airmen how to run and maintain the base. Base operations are

a model for the direction the transition team hopes to take. Airmen advise more than train and are settling into a hands-off role as Iraqis take on more responsibility.

"They fly [missions] independently," Colonel Brunworth said. The U.S. Airmen are advisers.

Iraqi airmen fly intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, and airlift missions each day. As Iraq's air force continues to grow and operate itself, the American advisors know the Iraqis must learn some things by themselves and carry out functions in ways that work best for them.

"We're not trying to make them into the U.S. Air Force, we're trying to make them into a self-sustainable, Iraqi air force," the colonel said.

General Kareem is proud to be a part of the new air force. Having

IRAQI AIR FORCE: FROM RUBBLE TO RESTORATION

BY ORVILLE F. DESJARLAIS JR.

American Airmen are accomplishing what former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein feared to do even before Desert Storm, and what insurgents today decry with extreme prejudice — they're helping build a competent Iraqi air force.

In the 1970s, the Iraqi dictator removed or executed those within his ranks he feared were potential threats to his total power, according to an article in the Winter 1992 Airpower Journal. Ranking air force officers fell victim to Saddam's insecurities. He executed 60 officers and imprisoned or exiled hundreds more after he became president in 1979.

Saddam knew the power of a competent air force, but was afraid his pilots would use aircraft to lead a coup. So, after the executions, he purposefully created dissension within his ranks until coalition troops overthrew him in 2003.

Today, with American Airmen helping Iraq rebuild its air force, insurgents are continuing what Saddam started. They're trying to foil America's attempt to restore Iraq's air force by killing Iraqis who've joined their country's military.

"The insurgents identify these guys and kill them and their families in the most horrendous fashion," said Col. Philip Senna. He leads the Air Advisor Training Program for Airmen tasked to support the Coalition Air Force Transition Team rebuilding Iraq's air force.

"Those murders had a big impact on the U.S. folks doing the mission," said the colonel, who is stationed at Air Education and Training Command headquarters at Randolph Air Force Base, Texas. "It brings home the sacrifices the Iraqis make to build a nation. It makes you want to succeed even more to help these people rid their nation of these barbarous individuals."

photo by Airman 1st Class Robbie Arp



Airmen deploying to Iraq carry an "injured" Airman during combat convoy training at Camp Bullis, Texas. The two-week course is the first step in their future mission to advise the Iraqi air force about creating new military technical schools in Iraq.

It's this type of steely resolve that caused U.S. Central Command Air Forces to send a team of pilots and maintainers to Iraq in 2005 to train the Iraqi air force to fly simple airlift missions and reconnaissance sorties. From this temporary deployment emerged today's team of Air Force advisers on the transition team.

The team's focus encompasses all aspects of military training, not just flying. As a result of their efforts over the past two years, Iraq now has an air force academy, a flight training school, a technical school and a basic military school. Airmen also advise Iraqis in firefighting and police skill tactics.

Since the start of this emerging advisory role, training command officials have naturally played a major part in the planning. After all, they're the Air Force's experts in training. After the first team returned, Colonel Senna helped develop the Air Adviser Training Program. Basically, AETC trains the advisers before they deploy.

"We're not training them to be combatants," he said. "We're teaching them skills that will help

served under Saddam's regime, he's grateful for the friendships and partnerships the two nations have formed.

"I want the Iraqi air force to regain its posterity with new aircraft, pilots and maintainers," the general said. "I thank the U.S. Air Force for helping us, and hope the [relations] continues."

General Allardice is optimistic the transition team will do its job well. Each day, more Iraqis leave training and, little by little, assume control of their own air force — and destiny.

"We're the best in the world at taking apart an air force and dismantling the military of a country," General Allardice said. "But how many nations will turn around and put people like me, and the airmen with me, back into the country to restore their military?"

"I think that's a great tribute to our nation," he said. "And a pretty good tribute to our Air Force." 🇺🇸